

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Wilderness Reviews for Alaska National Wildlife Refuges

Questions and Answers

Q: What is the purpose of a comprehensive conservation plan?

A comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) is the result of a mandatory planning process that provides long-range guidance and management direction for a national wildlife refuge. Development and revision of CCPs for national wildlife refuges in Alaska are governed by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act.

Q: Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service revising the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's CCP?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), an agency within the Department of Interior, has authority to administer national wildlife refuges. ANILCA directs the Secretary of the Interior to "prepare, and, from time to time, revise, a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge." Service policy states, "We will revise the CCP every 15 years thereafter or earlier . . ." The existing CCP for Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was signed on September 12, 1988.

Q: Who is involved in development of the CCP?

The planning process began in spring of 2010 with public discussions about issues and future goals for stewardship of the Arctic Refuge. The Service received comments from the public via email, the web, mail, and from meetings in Washington DC, Anchorage, Arctic Village, Fairbanks, Fort Yukon, Kaktovik and Venetie.

The Service has released the draft CCP/EIS for public review and comment. Following the public comment period, the Service will analyze the comments received, prepare responses to substantive comments and revise the CCP/EIS.

Additional information about the planning process for Arctic Refuge is posted at <http://arctic.fws.gov/ccp.htm>.

Q: What is the difference between a Draft CCP and a Draft EIS?

The CCP is a 15 year plan that describes the management activities for the refuge. In order to allow public input into decisions regarding the management direction the Service prepares a Draft Environmental Impact Statement. The Draft EIS for the Arctic National Refuge contains 6 alternatives each with unique qualities.

The Service has not selected a preferred alternative at this time and is considering each of the six alternatives described in the DEIS and Draft CCP. The Service will listen to and consider

comments received during the open comment period before selecting a preferred alternative and prior to a final decision.

Q: How does the CCP affect the public?

The CCP will provide long-range guidance and management direction for the refuge for the next 15 years or until the CCP is revised again. Legal mandates and Service policies require public involvement in the planning process. In addition, public engagement will improve the CCP and lead to greater public ownership of its provisions.

Q. How has public input been considered in the plan?

The objective in seeking public comment is to find out what people think is important and to identify issues and solutions that could be addressed in the CCP. The following summarizes comments received to date: 94,061 comments in the form of emails, letters, website submittals, oral comments, faxes, postcards, etc.; of these, 1,480 were substantive original comments, and 92,581 were form letters from 10 different campaigns.

By far, the most frequent comments pertained to the Refuge's coastal plain, especially support for or opposition to wilderness designation or oil and gas development. In addition, the Service received comments on commercial activities, government activities and private activities on refuge lands. Native concerns were commonly expressed, with regard to subsistence, culture, access, or private lands. The Service also received comments on the planning process, our draft vision and goals and the proposed Wild & Scenic River review, among other issues.

Refuge staff identified 37 issues from public comments and comments received from Service employees. The issues raised included concerns about development, policy, ecology, management, visitor use and administration. Staff carefully considered each issue, determining if the issue would be addressed best through management alternatives in the draft CCP, goals and objectives, or further step-down planning.

Q. Which alternative was selected as the preferred alternative?

The Draft CCP does not include a preferred alternative. The Service will listen to and consider public comments before selecting a preferred alternative for the Final CCP.

Q. Do the wilderness and wild river reviews violate the “no more” clause of ANILCA?

ANILCA Section 1326(b) states "No further studies of Federal lands in the State of Alaska for the single purpose of considering the establishment of a conservation system unit, national recreation area, national conservation areas or for related or similar purposes shall be conducted unless authorized by this Act or further Act of Congress." ANILCA Section 102(4) defines conservation system units (CSU) to include wilderness areas.

CCP revisions are broad-based planning efforts, not single purpose studies of possible CSU establishment. A wilderness review conducted in conjunction with a CCP revision is consistent with ANILCA planning provisions and NEPA, and does not require Congressional authorization.

Q. What impact would wilderness designation have on predator management on the refuge?

The Arctic Refuge's purposes, established when the refuge was created in 1960 and expanded under ANILCA, recognize that all native species are an integral part of the refuge, and management will allow native fish and wildlife populations to continue without control or manipulation, a policy that would only be changed in the face of management emergencies. Wilderness designation would not change these management guidelines.

Management emergencies include situations where threatened or endangered species, natural diversity, water quality and/or quantity or subsistence resources are seriously jeopardized, or the introduction of an invasive species potentially necessitate actions not normally permissible. In emergencies, the Refuge manager is authorized to take whatever prudent and reasonable actions are necessary.

Q. What is the current estimate of the oil and gas potential of the refuge?

The U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) most recent comprehensive assessment of undiscovered oil and gas resources in Arctic Refuge was published in 1999. The assessment encompassed the federally-managed 1002 Area, Native corporation lands of the coastal plain and the adjacent Beaufort Sea State waters. Other parts of the Refuge are already permanently off-limits to oil and gas exploration and were not assessed.

The USGS study dealt with the uncertainty of predicting undiscovered resources by adopting a probabilistic approach, using statistical distributions to capture the range of possible outcomes. USGS estimated that the entire assessment area contains between 5.7 and 16 billion barrels (BBO) of technically recoverable oil, with a mean (expected value) of 10.4 BBO. Technically recoverable non-associated natural gas (gas in reservoirs containing little or no oil) was estimated to range from 0 to 10.9 trillion cubic feet (TCF), with a mean of 3.8 TCF. Most of this volume was ascribed to the Federal 1002 lands, with mean recoverable oil and gas estimated at 7.7 BBO and 3.5 TCF.

Although these estimates were developed using all the available data and standardized assessment methods, they are inherently speculative in nature, since the resources remain undiscovered. Their accuracy can only be determined by drilling test wells.

Q. Does oil and gas development occur on refuges?

About one quarter of America's National Wildlife Refuges have or have had oil and gas activity within their borders (drilling, exploration, production), though in some cases this activity predated their designation as refuges.

Q. What impact would wilderness designation by Congress have on oil and gas development?

All of the Arctic Refuge, including the coastal plain (sometimes called the “1002 area,” as it is referred to in ANILCA), is currently closed to oil and gas exploration and development and could only be opened to such activity through an act of Congress. Congress is also the only authority that can designate wilderness, or remove a wilderness designation. If Congress designated additional wilderness areas in the Arctic Refuge, it could later reverse these designations and approve oil and gas exploration (or approve exploration in a wilderness area). It would be a significant step for Congress to remove a wilderness designation, and for that reason, it is presumed that designation provides another level of protection for the areas involved.

Q. In light of the current energy situation, shouldn't the Arctic Refuge be available to supply oil and gas for our energy future?

Designating additional wilderness areas within Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would not affect the presence of oil and gas in these areas. Only Congress has the authority to decide whether or not the refuge's coastal plain (the 1002 Area) should be made available for oil and gas development.

Q: Will the CCP include any decisions regarding oil development on the Arctic Refuge?

No. Only Congress has the authority to decide whether or not the refuge's coastal plain (the 1002 Area) should be made available for oil and gas development.

Q: Will the CCP change hunting and fishing or subsistence rules?

No. The CCP will not change harvest regulations. Regulations concerning sport harvest of fish and game are governed by the State of Alaska, and harvest of subsistence resources are governed by the Federal Subsistence Board.

Q. How would wilderness designation affect subsistence access to the refuge? Could local residents still use snow machines and other motorized access for subsistence uses?

Wilderness designation would not change harvest regulations. Regulations concerning sport harvest of fish and game are governed by the State of Alaska, and harvest of subsistence resources are governed by the Federal Subsistence Board. Use of snow machines, motorboats, and other surface means of access traditionally used for subsistence would not be affected by a change in management status.

Q. What is the extent of public use, subsistence and recreation on the Arctic Refuge?

Approximately 1,000 visitors a year participate in recreational pursuits such as river floating, hiking, backpacking and hunting.

Residents of six communities (Arctic Village, Chalkyitsik, Fort Yukon, Kaktovik, Venetie, and Wiseman) use the refuge for subsistence purposes. Specific use of the refuge varies from year to year based upon many factors. The total amount of subsistence use of the refuge is not well documented, but residents of these communities are known to harvest migratory birds, land mammals, fish, marine mammals, fur bearers and other resources, on or near the refuge.

Q. Would wilderness designation alter recreational use of the refuge?

Additional wilderness designation would result in little if any change in recreational use of the refuge. Designation of more wilderness could positively affect recreational opportunities for solitude, exploration and freedom. People who want to visit designated wilderness could reach it more easily if areas near the Dalton Highway were designated.

Q. Have the wilderness study area boundaries been modified from the original plan? If so, how and why?

The study area boundary between the Brooks Range and Porcupine Plateau WSAs has changed from the original plan. In 1988, the boundary between these two study areas followed the East Fork of the Chandalar River. In the Draft Revised CCP, the boundary has been moved east of the river approximately 20 miles. Additionally, approximately 230,000 acres of the wilderness study areas (180,000 acres of the Brooks Range Wilderness Study Area in the vicinity of Arctic Village and Old John Lake and approximately 40,000 acres of the Coastal Plain Wilderness Study area near Kaktovik) have been determined to not be suitable for wilderness designation. These areas were determined not suitable based on proximity to the communities, concentration of private lands, established patterns of use and other factors that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to manage them as wilderness. The remaining three wilderness study areas total a little over 11 million acres of land. Private lands within the refuge boundaries are not subject to wilderness or other designations.

Q: Are all areas of the Arctic Refuge not currently designated as wilderness considered in the wilderness review?

Yes. The Refuge conducted wilderness reviews for all three Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs), which encompass all non-wilderness refuge lands, with the exceptions around communities noted above. A review of any Wilderness Study Area can only result in a recommendation to designate or not designate. Should there be a recommendation to designate, the area can only be designated wilderness through an act of Congress.

Q: Can the Service designate wilderness areas through the CCP revision process?

No. Only Congress can designate wilderness. The Service may forward a wilderness recommendation to the Secretary of the Interior for consideration. If he chooses, the Secretary of the Interior may forward the recommendation to the President who may then transmit the proposal to Congress.

Q: What is the purpose of Congressionally-designated wilderness?

The purposes of congressionally-designated wilderness are to: a) protect and preserve the wilderness character of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System; and b) administer the System for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.

Q: What is the Service policy for conducting a wilderness review?

The national wilderness stewardship policy, completed in November 2008, mandates wilderness reviews for refuges outside of Alaska and makes such reviews optional for refuges within Alaska. However, a Director's memorandum from January 2010 directs refuges, including those in Alaska, to conduct wilderness reviews during the planning process. Given this direction, the Service has decided to conduct wilderness reviews of suitable areas within Alaska refuges.

Q: If the Service recommends wilderness to the Secretary, how does it affect refuge management?

The Service manages recommended wilderness in a way that protects the wilderness character of the area. Refuge uses and on-the-ground management would not incur substantial changes. The legal requirements of the Wilderness Act do not apply until Congress makes a formal designation.

Q: Is a wild and scenic river review part of the CCP revision process?

Yes. The Service inventoried, studied, and might possibly recommend rivers suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Designation of a Wild and Scenic River requires an act of Congress.

Q. What other management issues are examined or proposed in the plan?

Among the other issues addressed in the draft CCP are: usage patterns for the Konugut River, the impacts of climate change, fire management regimes, water issues, and the removal of administrative buildings. The plan also contains a vision statement, goals, and objectives for refuge management. The goals are broad statements of desired future conditions, and the objectives identify specific management activities the refuge plans to undertake to implement the plan.

Q. Appendix H of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge draft revised plan contains a wilderness review. It states that the wilderness study areas have been determined to be suitable and are "preliminarily recommended for wilderness designation." What does this mean?

A. The wilderness review in Appendix H is a draft and contains the recommendations of the wilderness review team (a group of Service employees) based on criteria in the Wilderness Act and Service Manual (610 FW 3, 4, and 5). As with all other parts of the draft comprehensive conservation plan, the wilderness review is out for public review and we are soliciting comments. Of the six alternatives displayed in the draft plan, 4 alternatives contain wilderness

recommendations and 2 alternatives do not contain wilderness recommendations. The Service has not selected a preferred alternative. Wilderness recommendations, if any, will be finalized with the Record of Decision on the final plan. Any recommendations may be forwarded by the Service Director to the Secretary of the Interior. The Secretary may forward recommendations to the President, who may transmit them to Congress. Only Congress can designate wilderness.